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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY ASTANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0384
INFO RUEHAST/USOFFICE ALMATY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1808
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE 0237
RUCNCLS/SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASTANA 002223

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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER: KAZAKHSTAN ELECTION PREVIEW

REF: A. Astana 2069 B. Astana 1906

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: With Kazakhstan's parliamentary elections headed into the final few days of campaigning, it is clear that the pre-election period has been substantially freer and fairer than in any prior election. As one pundit put it, the political field is now much more level, although there are still some big bumps, as Nur Otan maintains significant institutional advantages. The two principal opposition parties have had an opportunity to wage a vigorous campaign, with few obstacles to meeting voters and placing advertising on television and radio, and in the print media. Television, while neither unbiased nor equal in its reporting, nonetheless has for the first time provided substantial coverage of the opposition's campaign efforts and broadcast two debates. Despite the improvements, however, the splintered opposition's failure to deliver a focused message, the popularity of President Nazarbayev, and voter apathy may yet result in a massive Nur Otan victory, an unappealing result for the GOK. End Summary.

Pre-election Campaigning: So Far, So Good

¶2. (SBU) Presidential Administration Chief Adilbek Dzhaksybekov spoke to the Ambassador at length on August 14 about the authorities' efforts to provide an opportunity for the opposition to make its case to the electorate, and a definitive decision by President Nazarbayev to accept the results of the election. Interestingly, he noted that there had been "discussions" within the Administration about other approaches, but he said that he has never considered any other option realistic for Kazakhstan at this point in its history. He said that such a positive and constructive approach is important for Kazakhstan's development and for Nazarbayev's legacy of creating a democratic society. He added that new election day procedures for counting ballots and distributing precinct-level protocols make it "impossible" for any widespread cheating to occur.

¶3. (SBU) The Ambassador met with National Social Democratic Party (NSDP) leaders Bulat Abilov and Oraz Zhandosov on August 10. While they offered a number of examples of impediments to their campaign and "bad faith" by the government and Nur Otan, they appeared to be primarily focused on running their campaign and getting their message out. They, too, said that newspapers were completely free to cover the campaign as they wished, and that there had been little or no interference with their campaign rallies, distribution of literature, or meetings with voters. They did complain, however, about biased television coverage and a lack of access to commercial billboards. (Reftel A)

14. (SBU) New electoral and counting procedures, if implemented as designed, may yet reduce the opportunities to distort the vote count and aggregation. New requirements include displaying each ballot to all commission members and observers before counting it, providing all interested parties with copies of the protocol of results, and allowing each party competing in the election the right to have a "consultative" member (without vote) at each level of the election commissions (Reftel B). (Note: NSDP plans to have such representatives on higher-level commissions, but only observers at the precinct level. End Note.) In addition, the Central Election Committee (CEC) has promised to post precinct-by-precinct results on the Internet, allowing observers to compare the protocols they received with the ones used to calculate the final results. (Comment: The sooner the CEC does this the better, although there appears to be some debate within the Commission about whether to put the protocols on the Internet as they are received, or only after all the results are tabulated and announced. End Comment.)

15. (SBU) Historically, efforts by local and regional authorities to ensure that they produce better-than-average results for the president and his party have been a major source of election fraud in Kazakhstan. The Ambassador has heard from Dzhakysbekov and his deputy Maulen Ashimbayev, as well as from Nur Otan campaign chairman Kairat Kelimbetov, that they have explicitly told local authorities not to interfere with the ballot counting process. Nonetheless, the chances of at least isolated attempts of malfeasance by local authorities are high - and it is certainly possible that they could be widespread enough to discredit the entire process. We are fairly confident, however, that the OSCE election observation mission will be in a position to detect and report on any significant level of such abuse.

The Outcome

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16. (SBU) We can predict with a high degree of confidence that Nur Otan will win a majority, perhaps even a large majority, of the votes cast. We also expect that voter turnout will be relatively low. Beyond that, crystal balls are in substantial disagreement, and published polls are all over the map and in our view totally unreliable. In the last election, USAID financed both pre-election and exit polls using reliable independent contractors and methodologies. Unfortunately, there was neither time nor the budget to arrange for such polling for these elections.

17. (SBU) The Presidential Administration tells us that their internal polls suggest low votes for the two principal opposition parties, Ak Zhol and NSDP. In an August 9 meeting with the Ambassador, Presidential Administration Deputy Chief Ashimbayev said that their information suggested that NSDP would not pass the 7 percent threshold. NSDP Abilov and Zhandosov, however, claimed that their polling suggested the party was getting 20 percent or more among "likely voters," and was leading in Almaty and two or three other regions.

18. (SBU) The outcome will largely depend on turnout, and Nur Otan is likely to have a significant advantage in getting its supporters to the polls. It is much easier to mobilize voters in rural areas, where the opposition has significantly less support. Urban voters seem largely unexcited by the campaign. Abilov and Zhandosov said that they were anticipating a 20-30 percent turnout in Almaty, and that even strong supporters were telling them they saw no reason to vote this time.

19. (SBU) Comment: We think there is a reasonable chance that both NSDP and Ak Zhol will get more than 7 percent of the vote and get representation in Parliament - although it is also conceivable that both could fall short and the new Parliament will be completely in the hands of one party - an outcome our contacts in the Presidential Administration tell us would be undesirable and embarrassing. Our reaction to the election process, and the standard to which we

should hold the GOK, especially in view of its candidacy for the OSCE chairmanship in 2009, should not focus on the results. Rather, it should be focused on the process and take as its factual basis the OSCE election observation effort. So far, the OSCE's criticism has focused primarily on two legislative provisions that the observation mission believes are inconsistent with the Copenhagen commitments. These are both important issues, and could very well be on our post-election agenda with the GOK as we determine how to proceed to evaluate Kazakhstan's candidacy for the chairmanship, but in our view are separate issues from the conduct of the elections themselves. End Comment.